focus

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Ethiopia

For many hundreds of years, except for the Italian domination of 1935–1940, the Ethiopians, content with their own feudalistic but self-sufficient social and economic system, have successfully defended their mountain fortress against would-be invaders from the surrounding lowlands. It was not until 1894, when Emperor Menelik II granted a concession to build a 486-mile railroad from Djibouti, French Somaliland, to Addis Ababa that Ethiopia's isolation from the outside world began to be broken. But its progress toward modernization really began with the advent to power of Haile Selassie, first as Prince Regent in 1916 and then as Emperor in 1930. Though still an absolute ruler, with picturesque titles derived from legendary antiquity, Haile Selassie has given his people a constitutional government. He has abolished slavery, built schools and hospitals, and opened up the country to agricultural and industrial development.

Much remains to be done, but Haile Selassie has pushed Ethiopia a long way from its medieval past. Today, it not only is regarded by many as a country with great economic possibilities but plays an important role in world politics. Its agricultural potential is sufficient to prompt the belief that it could become the "breadbasket" of the Middle East. Politically, its tradition of independence commands respect and exercises much influence among other Africans.

Ethiopia, with about 457,000 square miles, is almost as large as Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona combined. This includes Eritrea, a prewar Italian colony, which became a part of the Ethiopian Federation in 1952 in accordance with a United Nations resolution. To speak of Ethiopia as a mountain fortress is to give only a mild idea of its inaccessibility; for not only does the heart of the country lie on two lofty, fantastically broken plateaus raised far above the lowlands, but these lowlands themselves on nearly all sides are semiarid or desolate desert where water is scarce, dust storms are frequent, and the heat is terrific. The Ethiopian Plateau, comprising about half the country and extending from Kenya in the south to Eritrea in the north, is between 4,000 and 11,000 feet above sea level, and some mountain peaks are more than 14,000 feet high. The Somali Plateau, in the east, is equally high. Separating these two, the deep, precipitous Rift Valley cuts diagonally across the country from Lake Rudolf on the Kenya border in the southwest to the hot, dry Danakil Plains along the Red Sea.

As might be expected, the uplands, even though they lie close to the equator, are pleasantly cool most of the time, and the southwest summer monsoon brings abundant rains, especially in the south and west, where the Sobat, the Blue Nile, and the Atbara

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Rivers receive the waters that irrigate and enrich the cotton fields of the Sudan and Egypt in the early fall.

The Ethiopians long ago recognized three distinct climatic zones in their country: *dega* (cold, with average temperatures of 50°–61° F., and more than 8,000 feet above sea level); *voina dega* (temperate, 61°–68°, 6,000–8,000 feet high); and *quolla* (hot, 68°–82°, below 6,000 feet). The dega is primarily grassland, strewn with many medium-sized wooded areas of the high-mountain type. It is a zone of livestock raising and cultivation of cereals, particularly wheat, barley, and teff (a variety of millet), and of beans, flax, and temperate fruits. The voina dega, embracing a great part of the plateau country and containing most of the cultivated and populated lands, is a zone for coffee, cotton, tobacco, soft grains, grapes, and olives. The quolla zone, which includes the lowlands of Danakil, the Awash Valley, the lower reaches of the Somali Plateau in Ogaden, the Sidamo-Borana area, and the lower Sudanese slopes, supports desert and thorn shrub vegetation and a savanna forest, and is peopled mainly by hardy nomads and their equally hardy sheep and camels.

No part of Ethiopia is heavily populated. On the basis of an estimated total population of 15,000,000, the average density is 36 persons per square mile; that of Eritrea, with a population of 1,103,600 (1950), about 23 per square mile; but distribution, of course, is uneven. The quolla zone is practically empty as compared with the provinces of Shoa, Arussi, Ilubabor, Kaffa, and Wallaga in the voina dega or even the dega zone. Few towns have a permanent population exceeding 10,000, though several of them appear to double this at market time.

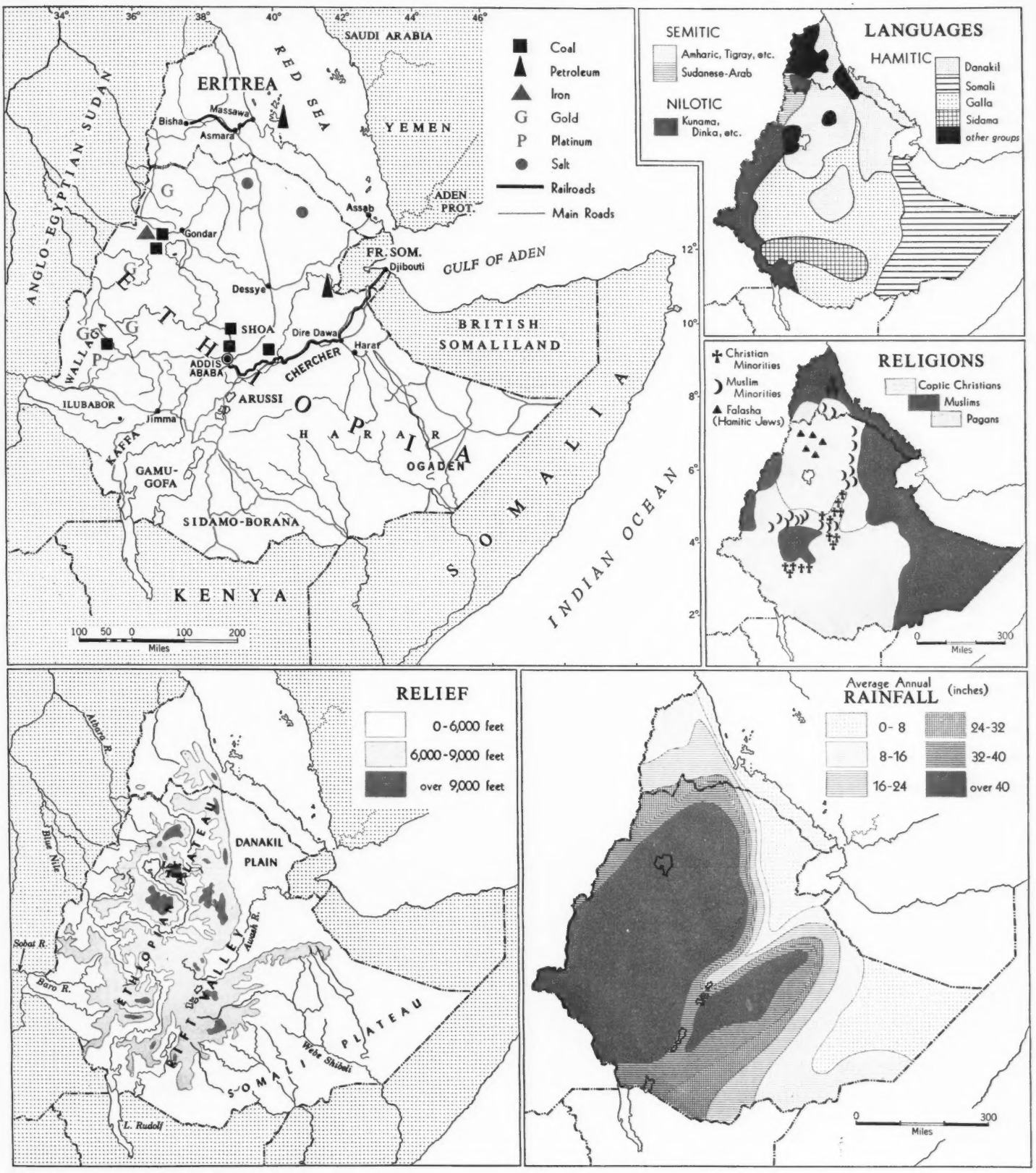
That Ethiopia has existed for centuries as a nation is indeed remarkable; for it is a conglomeration of peoples of widely differing origins and religions. The Amharas, who are Coptic Christians and 2,000,000 strong, have become predominant in politics and in civil and military affairs, and Amhara is the official language. The Gallas, who make up more than half of the total population, are partly pagan, partly Christian, and partly Mohammedan; most of them are farmers and laborers, though a few hold important government positions. Both the Amharas and the Gallas are of Hamitic origin. Other ethnic groups, important in numbers but of lesser cultural attainment, include the Tigraian, Agau, Falasha, Somali, Danakil, Sidama, Gurage, and various Negro and Negroid tribes such as the Nuer and the Anuak.

In Eritrea the population consists of Mohammedans and Coptic Christians in about equal numbers. There are no fewer than eight main languages; Tigrinya and Arabic, which are the most common, have now been declared Eritrea's official languages.

At least 90 per cent of the people in the Ethiopian Federation make their living directly or indirectly from crop production and livestock raising. In most parts of the Ethiopian Plateau many crops can be grown without irrigation. The black and dark-brown clay soils (black cotton soils) of the western lowland offer good possibilities for agricultural development; they could be cropped the year round if irrigation were provided during the dry season. In the subhumid and semiarid areas with marked moist and dry seasons, such as the piedmont and southern parts of the Rift Valley and the southeastern Somali slopes, the possibilities of development depend again on the availability of water, and on the suitability of the soils themselves for irrigation. In the desert areas, such as the Eritrean littoral, the Rift-Awash-Danakil Basin, and the eastern Somali slopes, the water problem is, of course, even more acute, and only the alluvial and red desert soils appear to offer farming possibilities.

The most important staple food crops are durra, a grain sorghum, and teff, which are grown both on the plateaus and in the lowlands. The Ethiopians grind these cereals between flat stones or pound them in wooden mortars to make flour for flat cakes of bread, which are eaten with dried beans, peas, or lentils ground into a fine meal and seasoned with pimento. Other extensively grown cereals are *bultuk* and *dagussa*. Bultuk is eaten as a mush or unleavened baked cake, and is used for making starch and alcohol, and at times as forage. Dagussa is also eaten by men and animals, and forms the basis of a fermented beverage, *talla*, which is similar to beer. Both bultuk and dagussa are emergency, drought-resistant crops that grow quickly when other crops fail in areas subject to prolonged dryness. Wheat, barley, and oats are less widely grown, and corn and sweet corn are confined mostly to the lowlands and middle highlands. Wheat, incidentally, has become an important export commodity since World War II. Pulses, including chickpeas, haricot beans, horse beans, broad beans, lentils, and soybeans, add variety to the diet.

In addition, Ethiopia grows many other crops. *Koba*, or "false banana" (*Musa ensete*), a fiber crop, is grown rather generally throughout the country; not only is it used for making ropes of all kinds and bags



Maps drawn by Vincent Kotschar

for handling grains, but the roots and lower parts of the plant supply a form of flour for food. The majority of people eat rather small quantities of fruits and vegetables, though many varieties grow either wild or under cultivation.

Another group of highly useful plants that grow wild in Ethiopia are the oilseeds, and increased production of some of them is generally regarded as one of the best means to promote exports and improve the foreign-trade position. Production costs for oilseeds in many countries are high when compared with those in Ethiopia, and there is a widespread shortage of fats and oils in the Middle East, as in many other parts of the world. For the extraction of oil the Ethiopians use mainly castor-oil plants, neuk (the main crop for soap and food oil), peanuts, sunflowers, cotton seed, linseed, sesame seed, rapeseed, pumpkin seed, mustard seed, suf, cabbage seed, and flaxseed.

At present coffee is the major export, and production almost doubled between 1945 and 1952, rising from 13,900 metric tons to 25,000. A large part of the crop is still harvested from the so-called "coffee forests," chiefly in the provinces of Kaffa, Ilubabor, Wallaga, and Gamu-Gofa. Well-established plantations of sizable acreages in the provinces of Kaffa and Sidamo-Borana and the Lake Tana district produce most of the rest, though some is grown in other parts of the country, particularly in the province of Arussi and the Chercher district of the province of Harar. Experts believe that within a few years, if methods are improved, Ethiopia may produce ten times as much coffee as it now does.

The wealth of the Ethiopian farmer is judged according to the number of animals he owns, and many farmers prefer to keep their livestock rather than sell it. Practically everyone has a few sheep and goats, and possibly a horse, a mule, a donkey, or a camel, and the cattle population is estimated at 18,000,000, or 1.2 head per person, which puts Ethiopia in the same class as such famous cattle countries as New Zealand, Australia, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. However, from a million to a million and a half cattle die each year of rinderpest; and contagious pleuropneumonia, anthrax, blackleg, and tick fever also occur regularly. Because of the incidence of virus infection, no European or Middle Eastern country will accept meat exports from Ethiopia. Until these diseases are controlled, this potentially rich supply of meat will continue to be unavailable to outside markets.

Much more valuable at present in terms of money are Ethiopia's hides and skins, the country's second-largest export. In 1951 the total value of these exports reached the equivalent of U.S. $12,400,000, an all-time high. Cattle hides rank first, followed by goat and sheep skins. Other skins include those of leopard, hyrax, otter, dikdik, colobus monkey, lynx, mountain fox, crocodile, and Dankali newborn kid. Ethiopian hides and skins are generally of fairly good quality and command rather high prices on the world's markets.

Cotton and sugar are the only agricultural products Ethiopia has to import, though they can be produced satisfactorily in the country. Virtually all the raw cotton imported is used by the single mill, located at Dire Dawa, which fails by far to satisfy the domestic cotton-textile demand. For the past 10 years, the imports of cotton textiles, mainly gray piece goods and yarns from England, the United States, and India, have consistently exceeded 40 per cent of the total imports by value. Increased domestic cotton production would release large sums of foreign exchange, which could be used to buy motor vehicles and parts, petroleum products, and other commodities which must be imported. Many areas apparently have soils and climates suitable for cotton.

The situation with respect to sugar is much the same except that concessions have been granted in the Awash Valley to two foreign firms for planting 4,200 acres of sugar cane, and it is expected that within a few years Ethiopia will be self-sufficient in sugar.

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In spite of a high yearly rainfall, only 2.8 per cent of the country is forest-covered. Foresters are in agreement that this part of the world was once well forested but has been seriously denuded by centuries of uncontrolled grazing and periodic burning-over. At present, the number of species of commercial value is limited; also, the best hardwoods are likely to be in inaccessible spots.

Some observers are of the opinion that Ethiopia is absolutely destitute of mineral resources worthy of mention; others believe that it possesses rich reserves of practically every known mineral. Perhaps the truth lies somewhere between the two. In any case, few minerals have been discovered in exploitable quantities. Some gold and platinum are produced. Iron ores are mostly of low grade; the indicated reserves are small, and their occurrence is such that the prospects for economic exploitation are not auspicious. No large coal deposits are to be expected, but some small ones may meet the needs of local industry.

How much petroleum Ethiopia has is a moot question. Optimism regarding the possibilities seems to be based largely on the occurrence of petroleum in adjacent parts of Africa and Asia, and on what appear to be surface indications within Ethiopia itself. However, some experts believe that geological conditions in Ethiopia are unfavorable for the formation and accumulation of petroleum, at least over the greater part of the country. Prospecting for petroleum has been under way since 1949 by the Sinclair Oil Company of the United States, but no findings have been announced.

Some mineral experts believe that Ethiopia has rich uranium deposits, but this, too, requires study.

Ethiopia's further economic development will depend largely on overcoming the transportation problems created by the topography. Present transportation costs are high, and deliveries are slow. With the exception of the Baro River in the southwest, there are no navigable rivers. Many river valleys are narrow gorges, sultry, and choked with vegetation. Air transport has become increasingly used for freight but cannot be expected to be a substitute for road transport.

Internal trade to and from the periodic markets travels mostly by roads. Of the 43,300 miles of roads in Ethiopia proper, more than 31,000 miles are mere pack trails for donkeys, mules, and camels; only 11,000 miles can be used to a certain extent by bus or truck. Most of these roads deteriorated greatly after the evacuation of the Italians in 1940. However, in 1950 the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development extended a loan of U.S. $5,000,000 for the rehabilitation and maintenance of the major routes. When completed, these roads not only will

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focus is published monthly (except July and August) by the American Geographical Society to provide background facts and geographical interpretations of current world problems and problem areas. Subscription: $1 for 10 issues ($1.25 Canada, Alaska, Hawaii). Copies (folded) of the Society's four-color Map of the World (about five by three feet; equatorial scale 1:30,000,000) may be purchased by all *FOCUS* subscribers at the special discount price of 75 cents each.

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considerably expedite the movement of goods within the country but will facilitate the shipping of exports and imports, most of which have had to travel via the French-owned Addis Ababa-Djibouti railroad or the short line linking Massawa with the highlands.

Another difficulty in Ethiopia's economic development is the almost complete lack of trained personnel. In the past few years the government has signed agreements with the United States and various United Nations specialized agencies, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Health Organization, and the Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, providing for technical assistance. The projects include establishment of an agricultural college and agricultural schools, control of animal diseases, improvement of hides and skins, improvement of crops, mineral development, and improvement of public health. Under these agreements foreign experts not only make studies and recommendations but also train Ethiopian personnel to meet future needs.

Shortage of capital to finance projects is another problem. The government has obtained in the last few years loans from the International Bank (besides the one for the roads) to establish a development bank for promoting agricultural and industrial projects ($2,000,000), and to improve the telephone and telegraph system ($1,500,000). It has also initiated new policies to encourage foreign capital investment.

The Ethiopians undoubtedly feel that they still face a host of difficulties, but it would seem that under the leadership of Haile Selassie they are gradually solving the ancient problems of isolation and ignorance.

LESLIE T. C. KUO

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During June and July of this year, complete sets of back issues of FOCUS (including those issues listed elsewhere as out of print) are available at $4.90 each; binders, which hold 20 issues, are available at 75 cents each (both payable in advance, as usual).

Atlas of Diseases

Plate 15 of the Society's Atlas of Diseases is the first in a subseries of three maps planned to portray the geographical distribution and ecology of spirochetal diseases. Plate 15 deals with yaws, bejel, and pinta, which are transmissible diseases caused by direct contact with spirochetes. Inorganic factors favoring their occurrence are lowlands, warm temperatures, and high humidities. Important among the organic factors is the soil cover, directly because it causes skin abrasions through which the pathogenic organism enters, or indirectly because of some common correlations with an as yet unidentified factor. Cultural traits seem most significant. Yaws is an expression of miserable living conditions, of densely populated areas, of crowded savanna village markets, of a primitive way of life in dark, windowless huts.

For the first time in the Atlas of Diseases, photographs have been used as a part of a map sheet. Plate 15 shows several photographs of patients in various stages of the disease. This map is available free upon request to Fellows and subscribers to the *Geographical Review;* it may be purchased by others at $1.50 flat, or $1.25 folded.